# THE MYSTERY OF CLOOMBER

### By Arthur Conan Doyle

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## CHAPTER I. THE HEGIRA OF THE WESTS FROM EDINBURGH

I John Fothergill West, student of law in the University of St. Andrews, have endeavoured in the ensuing pages to lay my statement before the public in a concise and business-like fashion.

It is not my wish to achieve literary success, nor have I any desire by the graces of my style, or by the artistic ordering of my incidents, to throw a deeper shadow over the strange passages of which I shall have to speak. My highest ambition is that those who know something of the matter should, after reading my account, be able to conscientiously indorse it without finding a single paragraph in which I have either added to or detracted from the truth.

Should I attain this result, I shall rest amply satisfied with the outcome of my first, and probably my last, venture in literature.

It was my intention to write out the sequence of events in due order, depending on trustworthy hearsay when I was describing that which was beyond my own personal knowledge. I have now, however, through the kind cooperation of friends, hit upon a plan which promises to be less onerous to me and more satisfactory to the reader. This is nothing less than to make use of the various

manuscripts which I have by me bearing upon the subject, and to add to them the first-hand evidence contributed by those who had the best opportunities of knowing Major-General J. B. Heatherstone.

In pursuance of this design I shall lay before the public the testimony of Israel Stakes, formerly coachman at Cloomber Hall, and of John Easterling, F.R.C.P. Edin., now practising at Stranraer, in Wigtownshire. To these I shall add a verbatim account extracted from the journal of the late John Berthier Heatherstone, of the events which occurred in the Thul Valley in the autumn of '41 towards the end of the first Afghan War, with a description of the skirmish in the Terada defile, and of the death of the man Ghoolab Shah.

To myself I reserve the duty of filling up all the gaps and chinks which may be left in the narrative. By this arrangement I have sunk from the position of an author to that of a compiler, but on the other hand my work has ceased to be a story and has expanded into a series of affidavits.

My Father, John Hunter West, was a well known Oriental and Sanskrit scholar, and his name is still of weight with those who are interested in such matters. He it was who first after Sir William Jones called attention to the great value of early Persian literature, and his translations from the Hafiz and from Ferideddin Atar have earned the warmest commendations from the Baron von Hammer-Purgstall, of Vienna, and other distinguished Continental critics.

In the issue of the *Orientalisches Scienzblatt* for January, 1861, he is described as "*Der beruhmte und sehr gelhernte Hunter West von Edinburgh*"—a passage which I well remember that he cut out and stowed away, with a pardonable vanity, among the most revered family archives.

He had been brought up to be a solicitor, or Writer to the Signet, as it is termed in Scotland, but his learned hobby absorbed so much of his time that he had little to devote to the pursuit of his profession.

When his clients were seeking him at his chambers in George Street, he was buried in the recesses of the Advocates' Library, or poring over some mouldy manuscript at the Philosophical Institution, with his brain more exercised over the code which Menu propounded six hundred years before the birth of Christ than over the knotty problems of Scottish law in the nineteenth century. Hence it can hardly be wondered at that as his learning accumulated his practice dissolved, until at the very moment when he had attained the zenith of his celebrity he had also reached the nadir of his fortunes.

There being no chair of Sanscrit in any of his native universities, and no demand anywhere for the only mental wares which he had to dispose of, we should have been forced to retire into genteel poverty, consoling ourselves with the aphorisms and precepts of Firdousi, Omar Khayyam, and others of his Eastern favourites, had it not been for the kindness and liberality of his half-brother William Farintosh, the Laird of Branksome, in Wigtownshire.

This William Farintosh was the proprietor of a landed estate, the acreage which bore, unfortunately, a most disproportional relation to its value, for it formed the bleakest and most barren tract of land in the whole of a bleak and barren shire. As a bachelor, however, his expenses had been small, and he had contrived from the rents of his scattered cottages, and the sale of the Galloway nags, which he bred upon the moors, not only to live as a laird should, but to put by a considerable sum in the bank.

We had heard little from our kinsman during the days of our comparative prosperity, but just as we were at our wit's end, there came a letter like a ministering angel, giving us assurance of sympathy and succour. In it the Laird of Branksome told us that one of his lungs had been growing weaker for some time, and that Dr. Easterling, of Stranraer, had strongly advised him to spend the few years which were left to him in some more genial climate. He had determined, therefore to set out for the South of Italy, and he begged that we should take up our residence at Branksome in his

absence, and that my father should act as his land steward and agent at a salary which placed us above all fear of want.

Our mother had been dead for some years, so that there were only myself, my father, and my sister Esther to consult, and it may be readily imagined that it did not take us long to decide upon the acceptance of the laird's generous offer. My father started for Wigtown that very night, while Esther and I followed a few days afterwards, bearing with us two potato-sacksful of learned books, and such other of our household effects that were worth the trouble and expense of transport.

## CHAPTER II. OF THE STRANGE MANNER IN WHICH A TENANT CAME TO CLOOMBER

Branksome might have appeared a poor dwelling-place when compared with the house of an English squire, but to us, after our long residence in stuffy apartments, it was of regal magnificence.

The building was broad-spread and low, with red-tiled roof, diamond-paned windows, and a profusion of dwelling rooms with smoke-blackened ceilings and oaken wainscots. In front was a small lawn, girt round with a thin fringe of haggard and ill grown beeches, all gnarled and withered from the effects of the sea-spray. Behind lay the scattered hamlet of Branksome-Bere—a dozen cottages at most—inhabited by rude fisher-folk who looked upon the laird as their natural protector.

To the west was the broad, yellow beach and the Irish Sea, while in all other directions the desolate moors, greyish-green in the foreground and purple in the distance, stretched away in long, low curves to the horizon.

Very bleak and lonely it was upon this Wigtown coast. A man might walk many a weary mile and never see a living thing except the white, heavy-flapping kittiwakes, which screamed and cried to each other with their shrill, sad voices.

Very lonely and very bleak! Once out of sight of Branksome and there was no sign of the works of man save only where the high, white tower of Cloomber Hall shot up, like a headstone of some giant grave, from amid the firs and larches which girt it round.

This great house, a mile or more from our dwelling, had been built by a wealthy Glasgow merchant of strange tastes and lonely habits, but at the time of our arrival it had been untenanted for many years, and stood with weather-blotched walls and vacant, staring windows looking blankly out over the hill side.

Empty and mildewed, it served only as a landmark to the fishermen, for they had found by experience that by keeping the laird's chimney and the white tower of Cloomber in a line they could steer their way through the ugly reef which raises its jagged back, like that of some sleeping monster, above the troubled waters of the wind-swept bay.

To this wild spot it was that Fate had brought my father, my sister, and myself. For us its loneliness had no terrors. After the hubbub and bustle of a great city, and the weary task of upholding appearances upon a slender income, there was a grand, soulsoothing serenity in the long sky-line and the eager air. Here at least there was no neighbour to pry and chatter.

The laird had left his phaeton and two ponies behind him, with the aid of which my father and I would go the round of the estate doing such light duties as fall to an agent, or "factor" as it was there called, while our gentle Esther looked to our household needs, and brightened the dark old building.

Such was our simple, uneventful existence, until the summer

night when an unlooked-for incident occurred which proved to be the herald of those strange doings which I have taken up my pen to describe.

It had been my habit to pull out of an evening in the laird's skiff and to catch a few whiting which might serve for our supper. On this well-remembered occasion my sister came with me, sitting with her book in the stern-sheets of the boat, while I hung my lines over the bows.

The sun had sunk down behind the rugged Irish coast, but a long bank of flushed cloud still marked the spot, and cast a glory upon the waters. The whole broad ocean was seamed and scarred with crimson streaks. I had risen in the boat, and was gazing round in delight at the broad panorama of shore and sea and sky, when my sister plucked at my sleeve with a little, sharp cry of surprise.

"See, John," she cried, "there is a light in Cloomber Tower!"

I turned my head and stared back at the tall, white turret which peeped out above the belt of trees. As I gazed I distinctly saw at one of the windows the glint of a light, which suddenly vanished, and then shone out once more from another higher up. There it flickered for some time, and finally flashed past two successive windows underneath before the trees obscured our view of it. It was clear that some one bearing a lamp or a candle had climbed up the tower stairs and had then returned into the body of the house.

"Who in the world can it be?" I exclaimed, speaking rather to myself than to Esther, for I could see by the surprise upon her face that she had no solution to offer. "Maybe some of the folk from Branksome-Bere have wanted to look over the place."

My sister shook her head.

"There is not one of them would dare to set foot within the avenue gates," she said. "Besides, John, the keys are kept by the house-agent at Wigtown. Were they ever so curious, none of our people could find their way in."

When I reflected upon the massive door and ponderous shutters

which guarded the lower storey of Cloomber, I could not but admit the force of my sister's objection. The untimely visitor must either have used considerable violence in order to force his way in, or he must have obtained possession of the keys.

Piqued by the little mystery, I pulled for the beach, with the determination to see for myself who the intruder might be, and what were his intentions. Leaving my sister at Branksome, and summoning Seth Jamieson, an old man-o'-war's-man and one of the stoutest of the fishermen, I set off across the moor with him through the gathering darkness.

"It hasna a guid name after dark, yon hoose," remarked my companion, slackening his pace perceptibly as I explained to him the nature of our errand. "It's no for naething that him wha owns it wunna gang within a Scotch mile o't."

"Well, Seth, there is some one who has no fears about going into it," said I, pointing to the great, white building which flickered up in front of us through the gloom.

The light which I had observed from the sea was moving backwards and forward past the lower floor windows, the shutters of which had been removed. I could now see that a second fainter light followed a few paces behind the other. Evidently two individuals, the one with a lamp and the other with a candle or rushlight, were making a careful examination of the building.

"Let ilka man blaw his ain parritch," said Seth Jamieson doggedly, coming to a dead stop. "What is it tae us if a wraith or a bogle minds tae tak' a fancy tae Cloomber? It's no canny tae meddle wi' such things."

"Why, man," I cried, "you don't suppose a wraith came here in a gig? What are those lights away yonder by the avenue gates?"

"The lamps o' a gig, sure enough!" exclaimed my companion in a less lugubrious voice. "Let's steer for it, Master West, and speer where she hails frae."

By this time night had closed in save for a single long, narrow

slit in the westward. Stumbling across the moor together, we made our way into the Wigtown Road, at the point where the high stone pillars mark the entrance to the Cloomber avenue. A tall dog-cart stood in front of the gateway, the horse browsing upon the thin border of grass which skirted the road.

"It's a' richt!" said Jamieson, taking a close look at the deserted vehicle. "I ken it weel. It belongs tae Maister McNeil, the factor body frae Wigtown—him wha keeps the keys."

"Then we may as well have speech with him now that we are here," I answered. "They are coming down, if I am not mistaken."

As I spoke we heard the slam of the heavy door and within a few minutes two figures, the one tall and angular, the other short and thick came towards us through the darkness. They were talking so earnestly that they did not observe us until they had passed through the avenue gate.

"Good evening, Mr. McNeil," said I, stepping forward and addressing the Wigtown factor, with whom I had some slight acquaintance.

The smaller of the two turned his face towards me as I spoke, and showed me that I was not mistaken in his identity, but his taller companion sprang back and showed every sign of violent agitation.

"What is this, McNeil?" I heard him say, in a gasping, choking voice. "Is this your promise? What is the meaning of it?"

"Don't be alarmed, General! Don't be alarmed!" said the little fat factor in a soothing fashion, as one might speak to a frightened child. "This is young Mr. Fothergill West, of Branksome, though what brings him up here tonight is more than I can understand. However, as you are to be neighbours, I can't do better than take the opportunity to introduce you to each other. Mr. West, this is General Heatherstone, who is about to take a lease of Cloomber Hall."

I held out my hand to the tall man, who took it in a hesitating, half-reluctant fashion.

"I came up," I explained, "because I saw your lights in the windows, and I thought that something might be wrong. I am very glad I did so, since it has given me the chance of making the general's acquaintance."

Whilst I was talking, I was conscious that the new tenant of Cloomber Hall was peering at me very closely through the darkness. As I concluded, he stretched out a long, tremulous arm, and turned the gig-lamp in such a way as to throw a flood of light upon my face.

"Good Heavens, McNeil!" he cried, in the same quivering voice as before, "the fellow's as brown as chocolate. He's not an Englishman. You're not an Englishman—you, sir?"

"I'm a Scotchman, born and bred," said I, with an inclination to laugh, which was only checked by my new acquaintance's obvious terror.

"A Scotchman, eh?" said he, with a sigh of relief. "It's all one nowadays. You must excuse me, Mr.—Mr. West. I'm nervous, infernally nervous. Come along, McNeil, we must be back in Wigtown in less than an hour. Good-night, gentlemen, goodnight!"

The two clambered into their places; the factor cracked his whip, and the high dog-cart clattered away through the darkness, casting a brilliant tunnel of yellow light on either side of it, until the rumble of its wheels died away in the distance.

"What do you think of our new neighbour, Jamieson?" I asked, after a long silence.

"Deed, Mr. West, he seems, as he says himsel', to be vera nervous. Maybe his conscience is oot o' order."

"His liver, more likely," said I. "He looks as if he had tried his constitution a bit. But it's blowing chill, Seth, my lad, and it's time both of us were indoors."

I bade my companion good-night, and struck off across the moors for the cheery, ruddy light which marked the parlour

# CHAPTER III. OF OUR FURTHER ACQUAINTANCE WITH MAJOR-GENERAL J. B. HEATHERSTONE

There was, as may well be imagined, much stir amongst our small community at the news that the Hall was to be inhabited once more, and considerable speculation as to the new tenants, and their object in choosing this particular part of the country for their residence.

It speedily became apparent that, whatever their motives might be, they had definitely determined upon a lengthy stay, for relays of plumbers and of joiners came down from Wigtown, and there was hammering and repairing going on from morning till night.

It was surprising how quickly the signs of the wind and weather were effaced, until the great, square-set house was all as spick-and-span as though it had been erected yesterday. There were abundant signs that money was no consideration to General Heatherstone, and that it was not on the score of retrenchment that he had taken up his abode among us.

"It may be that he is devoted to study," suggested my father, as we discussed the question round the breakfast table. "Perhaps he has chosen this secluded spot to finish some magnum opus upon which he is engaged. If that is the case I should be happy to let him have the run of my library."

Esther and I laughed at the grandiloquent manner in which he spoke of the two potato-sacksful of books.

"It may be as you say," said I, "but the general did not strike me during our short interview as being a man who was likely to have any very pronounced literary tastes. If I might hazard a guess, I should say that he is here upon medical advice, in the hope that the complete quiet and fresh air may restore his shattered nervous system. If you had seen how he glared at me, and the twitching of his fingers, you would have thought it needed some restoring."

"I do wonder whether he has a wife and a family," said my sister. "Poor souls, how lonely they will be! Why, excepting ourselves, there is not a family that they could speak to for seven miles and more."

"General Heatherstone is a very distinguished soldier," remarked my father.

"Why, papa, however came you to know anything about him?"

"Ah, my dears," said my father, smiling at us over his coffee-cup, "you were laughing at my library just now, but you see it may be very useful at times." As he spoke he took a red-covered volume from a shelf and turned over the pages. "This is an Indian Army List of three years back," he explained, "and here is the very gentleman we want-'Heatherstone, J. B., Commander of the Bath,' my dears, and 'V.C.', think of that, 'V.C.'—'formerly colonel in the Indian Infantry, 41st Bengal Foot, but now retired with the rank of major-general.' In this other column is a record of his services—'capture of Ghuznee and defence of Jellalabad, Sobraon 1848, Indian Mutiny and reduction of Oudh. Five times mentioned in dispatches.' I think, my dears, that we have cause to be proud of our new neighbour."

"It doesn't mention there whether he is married or not, I suppose?" asked Esther.

"No," said my father, wagging his white head with a keen appreciation of his own humour. "It doesn't include that under the heading of 'daring actions'—though it very well might, my dear, it very well might."

All our doubts, however, upon this head were very soon set at rest, for on the very day that the repairing and the furnishing had been completed I had occasion to ride into Wigtown, and I met upon the way a carriage which was bearing General Heatherstone and his family to their new home. An elderly lady, worn and sickly-looking, was by his side, and opposite him sat a young fellow about my own age and a girl who appeared to be a couple of years younger.

I raised my hat, and was about to pass them, when the general shouted to his coachman to pull up, and held out his hand to me. I could see now in the daylight that his face, although harsh and stern, was capable of assuming a not unkindly expression.

"How are you, Mr. Fothergill West?" he cried. "I must apologise to you if I was a little brusque the other night—you will excuse an old soldier who has spent the best part of his life in harness—All the same, you must confess that you are rather dark-skinned for a Scotchman."

"We have a Spanish strain in our blood," said I, wondering at his recurrence to the topic.

"That would, of course, account for it," he remarked. "My dear," to his wife, "allow me to introduce Mr. Fothergill West to you. This is my son and my daughter. We have come here in search of rest, Mr. West—complete rest."

"And you could not possibly have come to a better place," said I.

"Oh, you think so?" he answered. "I suppose it is very quiet indeed, and very lonely. You might walk through these country lanes at night, I dare say, and never meet a soul, eh?"

"Well, there are not many about after dark," I said.

"And you are not much troubled with vagrants or wandering beggars, eh? Not many tinkers or tramps or rascally gipsies—no vermin of that sort about?"

"I find it rather cold," said Mrs. Heatherstone, drawing her thick sealskin mantle tighter round her figure. "We are detaining Mr. West, too."

"So we are, my dear, so we are. Drive on, coachman. Good-day, Mr. West."

The carriage rattled away towards the Hall, and I trotted thoughtfully onwards to the little country metropolis.

As I passed up the High Street, Mr. McNeil ran out from his office and beckoned to me to stop.

"Our new tenants have gone out," he said. "They drove over this morning."

"I met them on the way," I answered.

As I looked down at the little factor, I could see that his face was flushed and that he bore every appearance of having had an extra glass.

"Give me a real gentleman to do business with," he said, with a burst of laughter. "They understand me and I understand them. 'What shall I fill it up for?' says the general, taking a blank cheque out o' his pouch and laying it on the table. 'Two hundred,' says I, leaving a bit o' a margin for my own time and trouble."

"I thought that the landlord had paid you for that," I remarked.

"Aye, aye, but it's well to have a bit margin. He filled it up and threw it over to me as if it had been an auld postage stamp. That's the way business should be done between honest men—though it wouldna do if one was inclined to take an advantage. Will ye not come in, Mr. West, and have a taste of my whisky?"

"No, thank you," said I, "I have business to do."

"Well, well, business is the chief thing. It's well not to drink in the morning, too. For my own part, except a drop before breakfast to give me an appetite, and maybe a glass, or even twa, afterwards to promote digestion, I never touch spirits before noon. What d'ye think o' the general, Mr. West?"

"Why, I have hardly had an opportunity of judging," I answered. Mr. McNeil tapped his forehead with his forefinger. "That's what I think of him," he said in a confidential whisper, shaking his head at me. "He's gone, sir, gone, in my estimation. Now what would you take to be a proof of madness, Mr. West?"

"Why, offering a blank cheque to a Wigtown house-agent," said I.

"Ah, you're aye at your jokes. But between oorsel's now, if a man asked ye how many miles it was frae a seaport, and whether ships come there from the East, and whether there were tramps on the road, and whether it was against the lease for him to build a high wall round the grounds, what would ye make of it, eh?"

"I should certainly think him eccentric," said I.

"If every man had his due, our friend would find himsel' in a house with a high wall round the grounds, and that without costing him a farthing," said the agent.

"Where then?" I asked, humouring his joke.

"Why, in the Wigtown County Lunatic Asylum," cried the little man, with a bubble of laughter, in the midst of which I rode on my way, leaving him still chuckling over his own facetiousness.

The arrival of the new family at Cloomber Hall had no perceptible effect in relieving the monotony of our secluded district, for instead of entering into such simple pleasures as the country had to offer, or interesting themselves, as we had hoped, in our attempts to improve the lot of our poor crofters and fisherfolk, they seemed to shun all observation, and hardly ever to venture beyond the avenue gates.

We soon found, too, that the factor's words as to the inclosing of the grounds were founded upon fact, for gangs of workmen were kept hard at work from early in the morning until late at night in erecting a high, wooden fence round the whole estate.

When this was finished and topped with spikes, Cloomber Park became impregnable to any one but an exceptionally daring climber. It was as if the old soldier had been so imbued with military ideas that, like my Uncle Toby, he could not refrain even in times of peace from standing upon the defensive.

Stranger still, he had victualled the house as if for a siege, for Begbie, the chief grocer of Wigtown, told me himself in a rapture of delight and amazement that the general had sent him an order for hundreds of dozens of every imaginable potted meat and vegetable.

It may be imagined that all these unusual incidents were not allowed to pass without malicious comment. Over the whole countryside and as far away as the English border there was nothing but gossip about the new tenants of Cloomber Hall and the reasons which had led them to come among us.

The only hypothesis, however, which the bucolic mind could evolve, was that which had already occurred to Mr. McNeil, the factor—namely, that the old general and his family were one and all afflicted with madness, or, as an alternative conclusion, that he had committed some heinous offence and was endeavouring to escape the consequences of his misdeeds.

These were both natural suppositions under the circumstances, but neither of them appeared to me to commend itself as a true explanation of the facts.

It is true that General Heatherstone's behaviour on the occasion of our first interview was such as to suggest some suspicion of mental disease, but no man could have been more reasonable or more courteous than he had afterwards shown himself to be.

Then, again, his wife and children led the same secluded life that he did himself, so that the reason could not be one peculiar to his own health.

As to the possibility of his being a fugitive from justice, that theory was even more untenable. Wigtownshire was bleak and lonely, but it was not such an obscure corner of the world that a well-known soldier could hope to conceal himself there, nor would a man who feared publicity set every one's tongue wagging as the general had done.

On the whole, I was inclined to believe that the true solution of the enigma lay in his own allusion to the love of quiet, and that they had taken shelter here with an almost morbid craving for solitude and repose. We very soon had an instance of the great lengths to which this desire for isolation would carry them.

My father had come down one morning with the weight of a great determination upon his brow.

"You must put on your pink frock to-day, Esther," said he, "and you, John, you must make yourself smart, for I have determined that the three of us shall drive round this afternoon and pay our respects to Mrs. Heatherstone and the general."

"A visit to Cloomber," cried Esther, clapping her hands.

"I am here," said my father, with dignity, "not only as the laird's factor, but also as his kinsman. In that capacity I am convinced that he would wish me to call upon these newcomers and offer them any politeness which is in our power. At present they must feel lonely and friendless. What says the great Firdousi? 'The choicest ornaments to a man's house are his friends.'"

My sister and I knew by experience that when the old man began to justify his resolution by quotations from the Persian poets there was no chance of shaking it. Sure enough that afternoon saw the phaeton at the door, with my father perched upon the seat, with his second-best coat on and a pair of new driving-gloves.

"Jump in, my dears," he cried, cracking his whip briskly, "we shall show the general that he has no cause to be ashamed of his neighbours."

Alas! pride always goes before a fall. Our well-fed ponies and shining harness were not destined that day to impress the tenants of Cloomber with a sense of our importance.

We had reached the avenue gate, and I was about to get out and open it, when our attention was arrested by a very large wooden placard, which was attached to one of the trees in such a manner that no one could possibly pass without seeing it. On the white

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